Meade's face faded a bit as the highspeed message came through, and then Uhura cut the communication and reached under her console with an inquiring look at Kirk. He nodded and she pulled something loose.

"I do seem to be having some trouble, Captain. I can't 'hear' a thing until I repair this."

"Thank you lieutenant. Mr. Spock, how would you like a little vacation on Ixmahx?"

"That would be agreeable, Captain."

"Good. Take a look at Meade's message and meet me in the shuttlebay in forty-five minutes. I want you to have mobility on the planet. I'll have your crew ready."

It was the shakiest of the three missions he had planned in his head--T'serek and two other security guards, Nadia Palevi and two of the gadget pushers from her labs, and Spock to get them in, do some investigating, and get them out again. It always made him itchy to leave men behind, but in this case it was the best option available.

When he walked into the deck area, he realized he hadn't been face to face with Nadia since the night of the party, or seen T'serek since the attack in the boy's cabin. If either of them were flattered or elated at being singled out for the mission it didn't show. Nadia gave him a friendly, respectful nod, but she was absorbed in some equipment her two crewmembers were loading into the shuttle, and T'serek and the two security guards were helping with the stowage. Their reserve reassured Kirk.

He had not been able to betray T'serek's confidence to his first officer. The whole idea made him squirm. It also raised the uncomfortable question of just how much Spock might have deduced for himself. The thought that Spock might believe Kirk was using their friendship to advance his private interests with either T'serek or Nadia covered him with a scalding wave of embarrassment. The respect and steady support of Spock himself, inside the Vulcan mask, was precious. He only realized how much at the thought of losing it.

Don't panic , he admonished himself. You don't have to feel guilty for something you haven't done. He ran an exacting eye over Spock checking out personnel and equipment, but couldn't find any increase of correctness in Spock's normal composure.

At precisely the correct moment, the Vulcan stepped back and gave the Captain his attention, effectively focusing every eye in the room on Kirk.

God, he does that well. It would be twice the job without him.

"I'm sending you on a dangerous mission," he began. "Politically dangerous, maybe physically dangerous. You will be out of contact with the Enterprise, entirely dependent upon yourselves to gather the information Starfleet needs, possibly to deal with the Ixmahx and the Romulans. Remember that your primary goal is to gather information, not start a war.

"Some of you are scientists. Don't endanger the mission with unnecessary curiosity. Some of you are security. It's your job to keep the scientists safe--but not so safe they can't do their jobs.

"Mr. Spock, I have every confidence in you and your team." End standard peptalk. He paused, relaxed slightly, and gave them the provocative smile. "Good hunting."

He'd struck the right note. He could read it in Spock's grave Vulcan salute, in T'serek's glowing eye. What is the current? How is the net cast that personality creates? Why can James Kirk get that response and not another man just as smart, just as well meaning? Use it or lose it. What if the Federation ran out of just causes? Would he be able to stop?

He saw them into the shuttle and then headed for the airlock so they could depressurize the bay. McCoy was on the other side, loitering in the corridor. Funny how he always turned up when he was needed. Probably worried about scrambling all the Captain's eggs in one basket.

"Who shot your dog?" growled McCoy.

Kirk gave him the remains of the grin. "Bad case of what did I do to deserve this...firing them up with the old do or die. Don't even know how I do it."

"Neither did the centepede. Besides you're taking too much credit. Spock and Nadia are as curious as cats. And at T'serek's age, what mere CO could have kept you off the glory road?"

He's right. Worry doesn't help. Back to work.

McCoy caught that mental resolution out of thin air. In some ways, Jim was the most predictable person he'd ever met. Capable of literally laying down his life for his friends, he was also capable of sending his best friend, a current and a potential lover into danger of their lives if it was his duty to do so. And capable of living with it, so long as there was work to do.

"Scotty wants you to baptize his new gadget--something that looks like two tricycles dueling to the death."

"Then I'd better go see it. Thanks, Bones." And he was in gear again, the warmth lingering as he left McCoy behind.

McCoy mentally consigned Dray T'serek's heroic sensuality to perdition. He himself would sacrifice a lot of romantic exclusivity to maintain James Kirk in that balance of strength, sensitivity and drive that powered his command. Use it or lose it was a tactitian's oversimplification, but this particular tactitian believed it. If he ever seriously questioned his right to risk men's lives, it would be McCoy's painful duty to bar him from everything that made his life worth while.

What is this? the doctor demanded of himself, a wake? Go bully your staff--it's safer.

The sophistication of the transporter and the habit of living in a mobile environment meant that travel for its own sake was a rarity for the Enterprise crew. T'serek took the controls with Spock beside him in the copilot's seat. Beth Sunderson, her face as pink and pleased as a child's, took the seat nearest to Dray, and Clement, scowling at her, took the one farthest away. That left Nadia with the two security men, neither of whom she knew personally. They stood a little in awe of her status as a lab chief, and she found out that the younger one was named Tom Craven and the older one was Hillis--she wasn't sure if that were a first or last name. Hillis was from a heavy world, like Dray.